

Sufism for Common Man

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to reveal how the Sufi poets of Pakistan have contributed in making an elusive and multidimensional phenomenon such as Sufism viewable and accessible for common man. With culture and history as a backdrop, the Sufi poets adopt a humanistic rather than a didactic approach towards reforming their people spiritually. The present study focuses on the social and human elements in the poetry of Baba Bulleh Shah (1680-1752) and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1690-1760). It is an effort to show that the Sufi poets were essentially the poets of humanity and this is the crux of their universal appeal.

Keywords: Sufism, multi dimensional, accessible, poets of humanity, social, non-didactic

Introduction

To unveil the mysteries of Sufism, depends much on the mystic himself. For most of the mystics, the gift of mysticism is a prized personal possession; unrevealed and unshared. It is judiciously imparted to the unschooled public through rare glimpses. These spiritual insights signify novel mystical experiences difficult even for the mystics to contain and are usually expressed through poetry, songs and rapturous dances but whatever the form of expression, the experience is common. As Sorley (1984) says *the esoteric meaning of mystical poetry does not come to an unlettered multitude but failure to reach this level of understanding does not mean that the poems as musical compositions did not make their appeal or that they failed to illuminate the beliefs of common man*. Sufism has succeeded in holding staunchly to whatever it has to offer to its followers. It is an ideology not restricted to any individual belief, cultural code or religion. Despite a tolerance for variation, there is a common bloodline that runs through all facets of Sufism; Islamic mysticism, intellectual mysticism, nature mysticism and personal mysticism to name a few. They all belong to a bigger whole which regulates them and sets them apart from other ideologies. This unity and harmony is the true strength of Sufism. The Sufis *had constituted a spiritual family* (Schimmel, 1975). The beauty of Sufism was *the fraternal love that first came into existence among the Sufis of one group and was then extended to include*

humanity in general (Schimmel, 1975). Since Sufism is about humanity in general, Sufi poetry focuses on objects that construct our everyday life and the actions enacted on these objects. These objects are reconceptualized by the Sufis to construct greater realities as Ali S.Asani observes: *the most significant characteristic of this literature was its orientation to the lower, uneducated classes of society the audience understood neither Arabic nor Persian and so the Sufis began composing poetry in the vernaculars with they initially incorporated in the ritual of the sama,' "listening and dancing to mystical music"*

The act of dancing is a purely physical and social practice. People dance to enjoy, celebrate, to fulfill rituals, to assert primitive beliefs such as the African rain dance. Similarly, the Sufi disciples indulge in rapturous dances on the shrines of Sufi saints. But the dances of the Sufis are viewed as purely unworldly acts and are interpreted as intense spiritual moments. The dancers are in trance and oblivious of the world yet they employ human art and practices to show their spiritual state. The music to which the “whirling dervishes” dance is a human creation. Here, dance and music have become signs or symbols. *If the medium was to be intelligible to the people, its idioms and symbols should be no less so* (Roy, 1980) and so *the Sufis turned to the pre-existing indigenous folk-poetic tradition, a tradition that was mainly oral, meant to be recited or sung in a musical mode* (Asani, 1988). The symbols point towards a state, a condition and a happening. They are arbitrary symbols because they are arbitrarily interpreted.

Sufi literature is built upon these signs and symbols. These symbols have given Sufi poetry an abstract quality. Nothing is definite and fixed in Sufi expression because Sufism itself is not a lucid reality .It is a state, a perception and a condition. Alexander Kynsh in his book “Islamic Mysticism” examines Sufism from a variety of different perspectives specifically as a vibrant social institution and a specific form of artistic expression (mainly poetic). (Nacim-Pak-Shiraz, 2011) argues that there is an affinity between poetry and mysticism as *“both carry emotional rather than fictional content; both depend in great part, on a stream of subtle associations for their effect”*

Music and poetry are the most popular modes of expression for Sufism because it shares its idyllic traits with these forms of art. *‘The open-endedness of poetic language, in contrast to the argumentative language of science and logic, gives it an elasticity that allows it to refer to multiple signifieds. The characteristics of poetry make it the preferred vehicle for mystical experiences’* (Nacim- Pak-Shiraz, 2011)

These “subtle associations” and “mystical experiences” are made visible to the external world through a host of symbols and surprisingly these symbols are indigenous. So, perhaps Rumi would not have related to the symbol of a “spinning wheel” but to that of a “whirling dervish” both of which are vaguely similar, in that they symbolize the various stages of spiritual growth and cosmic movement through revolving and repetition. Both are aesthetically pleasing since they elaborate the perfection of form and movement. One belongs to the rustic world of rivers and mud houses, the other to the splendor of Turkey. *In the Sufi Way, the experience of the world and its perception is aesthetic in an ecstatic sense* (Erzen, 2008). So paradoxically, the Sufis shun the sensuous world but draw symbols from it to propagate nobler thoughts. Love for a

woman, love for wine, love for music are all symbols of love for Divinity. These fascinating paradoxes add to the mystifying charm of Sufism.

The symbols employed in Sufi poetry are ambivalent and culturally resonant. They allow for multiple interpretations because the norms and values they symbolize are subject to change with the changing social factors. Sufi thought and Sufi poetry, bears influences of so many historical and religious traditions. These extraneous influences have brought flexibility of expression to Sufi poems. The infinite meanings attached to a single motif have made Sufi poetry in the words of Schimmel (1975) *an intricate lace work*. She further says

“a tendency to enjoy these infinite possibilities of the language has greatly influenced the style of Arabic poets and prose writers, and in many sayings of the Sufis one can detect a similar joy in linguistic play; the author indulges in deriving different meanings from one root, he loves rhymes and strong rhythmical patterns – features inherited by the mystics of the Persian, Turkish and Indo Muslim tongues.

Most Sufi poets use literary devices like rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia. They also use multi-faceted symbols to increase the socio cultural value of their work. A novice to Sufi poems may initially be drawn to their outer beauty; the tales of love of Heer Ranjha or Sassui Punhu. The lyrical and mythical quality of these rustic poems incites deeper reading. Being cultural is being social and being social is being human. The Sufi poets of Pakistan love their homeland and love their people and they sing for their people, calling them towards Allah, shunning political and religious priests and the didactic way of learning. They find secret corridors to our hearts permeate our beings with their wakeful callings and help us find meaning in life.

Punjab and Sind, richly historical lands of color, music, and folk tales have nurtured some of the most exquisite Sufi poets. These poets sang their way to the hearts of the people with their lyrical ballads. All ideas central to Sufi thought: love for the Creator, self annihilation, pining for the beloved, unity of the being, self negation, are interwoven in the rustic Sufi poems but their greatest beauty lies in their simplicity and candor.

The more rustic, very idiomatic Punjabi and the complicated, musical Sindhi-both strong, expressive languages-were excellent media to express mystical feelings, though not mystical theories (Schimmel, 1975)

Bookish knowledge of Islam and demonstrative religious acts were spurned by the mystic poets who lauded simplicity and purity in the expression of love; both human and divine. *Like most Sufi poets Bulleh Shah considered prayer in form only, or for display, as an inconsequential activity (Ghaffar, 2005)*

راتیاج نگی نکرے نعابد ترا تیاچ ننگ نکت ے تیہو نات ے

Staying up all night, praying

Dogs stay awake at night

More than your stature their height

(Bulleh Shah : kafi 25)

The Sufi poets used symbols of daily life to reach the rustic peasants. In the following lines the

poet uses images from gardening and planting to create a compelling yet soothing sensation of the divine love permeating the heart.

Allah is like the jasmine plant which the preceptor planted in my heart...it remained near the jugular vein and everywhere- O Hu!

It spread fragrance inside when it approached the time of blossoming- O Hu!

(Sultan Bahu)

Though the sophistication and grandeur of Rumi's imagery is missing here, a tranquility of the heart is livid. The simplicity of expression never mars the sublimity of thought. Jasmine plant and jugular vein are symbols of nature which are deftly blended with spiritual realizations. Reality is asserted through trivialities of daily life. Meaning is constructed through emotional experiences. One of the recurring images in Punjabi poetry is that of a girl on a spinning wheel being indulgently chided by her mother for her laziness or distraction from work. This image is usually associated with the journey of life and the various stages of spiritual development.

The spinning wheel signifies the ruthless tide of time which stops for none. The girl's sluggishness denotes the baser self which hinders spiritual growth. There is no denying the fact that the relation between God and man is a primary concern with Bulleh Shah however as *Najam Hosain Syed* says "*this relation is not an esoteric preoccupation with afterlife. Bulleh Shah's God is a vital principle, moral as well as spiritual, social as well as individual, giving meaning to this everyday life*" The study will now specifically focus on the poetic works of Baba Bulleh Shah and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai.

Methodology

Data collection

The data comprises of excerpts from some of the renowned poems of *Baba Bulleh Shah* and *Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai*. The first text *Kafi* 35 is drawn from *Muzzaffar.A.Ghaffar's* book "*Bulleh Shah Within Reach*" volume II and the second is a translated text of *Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's* poem taken from "*The Risalo*" part I, *Mercy and Grace* from *H.T. Sorley's* book "*Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit*" and *Elsa Kazi's* '*Shah-Jo-Risalo*'. The original Punjabi and Sindhi text was obtained from multiple resources for more authenticity, the prominent of which are *Ashiq Hussain Memon's* "*Shah Abdul Latif : Poet of Love and Humanity*" and *Najam Hussain Syed's* collection of articles titled "*Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry*".

Theoretical underpinning

This study has its foundations in *Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction*. Not only the texts under analysis but all genres of Sufi poetry can be integrated with this theory. As earlier discussed, Sufism is an abstract phenomenon which is perceived and experienced but can never be satisfactorily defined. Therefore, Sufi expression also has similar abstract qualities. It is built

on symbols which are arbitrary in nature. They are historically and culturally conditioned and are constantly in flux. This is so because *language is conceived as language in use rather than a fixed structure*. Derrida does not undermine the importance of writing over speech and so the Sufi poems written hundreds of years ago still retain their aesthetic value even after suffering at the hands of unscholarly translators and compilers. Each time a Sufi poem is read, new meanings emerge because ‘meaning’ is extracted by the reader, it is not imposed by the writer. Moving on, the elusive nature of Sufi thought gives it transparent boundaries. The reality in Sufi expression is *diverse, fragmented and culture specific*. The symbols used in Sufi poems hold different meanings for different readers. Sufi poets are philanthropists. They love humanity. The vehicles they use to steer men towards God are cultural and historical symbols. Derrida’s concept of iterability and binary opposites is also relevant in this context. Mystic belief is primarily built on binary opposites. Love for God shown through the love for a woman or vice versa. In this case the love of God is privileged over the love of the human beloved. Similarly the binary opposites: man and beast represented by the camel and its human master, where the master (soul) is superior to the camel (body) because it has spiritually awakened and the camel (body) is still reluctant. In the poem “*Meri Bukkal De Wich Chor*”, the conflicting symbols are the thief (*chor*) and call to prayer (*baang*). One is a personal secret and the other is a general call towards prosperity. Spiritual prosperity dominates over the personal secret. Without Allah’s help the secret cannot be successfully unfolded and materialized.

Derrida’s concept of iteration is connected with rituals inherent in Sufi poetry. There are many recurring images in folk Sufi poetry which due to constant retelling have become a *communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid.....for any user in general*.

Thus the motif of the ‘camel’ denotes the long struggle towards a purer self, the *chor* (thief) is the birth of a tabooed idea or belief or secret love. The other recurring images in Sufi poetry are the traditional lovers *Heer Ranjha*, the woman at the spinning wheel and the yearning lover etc. These recurring symbols have made Sufism a *transmittable* phenomenon.

Data analysis

The first text to be analyzed will be *Bulleh Shah’s Kafi 35 “Meri Bukkal De Wich Chor”*. This poem is simply narrated and is not burdened with ambiguous imagery. It has a conversational style which increases its appeal because the reader feels that he is a silent audience to a secret conversation between two female friends. The word ‘*Ni*’ shows that a female protagonist is confiding to her intimate friend. The girl speaks of a ‘*chor*’ (thief) in her ‘*bukkal*’ (the folds of her wrap) whom she finds immensely difficult to hide. The ‘*chor*’ could be her lover or some tabooed belief which is gaining strength within her. She confides with her friend and cries,

میری بکال دے ووچ چور نی، میری بکال دے ووچ چور کیہنوں کوک کسناوان

Cry out, to whom, bewail

Who will listen the shrieks of the thief? (the unfolding of the secret)

What will be the consequences of such a confession in a conservative society? Falling in love for

a young girl was an outrageous crime, to think differently and to break customs was equally revolting. So, how should this young girl with her revolutionary outlook survive in an orthodox community? The secret is still in her bosom but it is tossing and turning. Bulleh Shah here implies that revolutions cannot be subdued for long and man has been empowered with faculties to rise against what is unjust or what he does not like in the manmade laws.

چورچ یور یونک لگای

Slowly he inched out, walked away

چگتو وچپے گ ایشور

The secret is just out and “*the noise in the world trundles up*”. The girl fears that before long the whole world will know her forbidding secret. “*The word ‘kook’ is both a wail intended to be heard and also all that needs to be said*” (Ghaffar, 2005). So, perhaps the secret was deliberately let out, indicating an imminent revolution. There is a swift change of subject in the fourth stanza.

مسلمان وسوویانتونٹردے بندو ٹردے گورو

Muslims fear funeral pyres

Hindus fear being tombed up

Conditions imposed by society, norms and pseudo religious forces are denounced by Bulleh Shah. He advocates enlightened progression and a rational approach towards living which is unmarred by religious prejudices.

Feminism runs strong in Sufi poetry “*the attitude of Sufism towards the fair sex was ambivalent and it can even be said that Sufism was more favorable to the development of feminine activities than were other branches of Islam*” (Schimmel, 1975)

Revolution is cradling within a woman’s bosom. She is the harbinger of change who will face the wrath of society. Women are subdued but are naturally a strong race. When ‘enlightenment’ will come, the age old strife between Muslims and Hindus will perish. People will strive for higher ideals rather than shunning each other’s religious practices.

عرشمنو راہناگنملایں

Prayer calls meet the lit-up heart

سنای نخت تہلو ر

Ears of capital Lahore picked up

The lighted sky (or the enlightened heart) receives the calls to prayer and Lahore, the cosmopolitan city, responds to the call, “Lahore picked up”. The tumult caused by the traveling secret is silenced by the early morning call to prayer. Here, Lahore is a symbol of life, humanity, multicultural interactions, history, art and education. But social elements need religious patronizing hence the “call to prayer”. The focal point of this poem is feminine rights, progression and a staunch devotion to Allah.

The second text is a segment from *Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai’s The Risalo “Sur Khambat”*. The main motif in this poem is that of a *tardy camel* who is being coaxed by its master to embark upon a journey which will bring them to the loved One.

ستدن سيٿن نه هون، بينهن نه تئيكاري رات رت قرا، جان جان تيٿ نه رون-! بينهن نيا پي نه تئيمنت جنين ميٿهو، پتر تي !
سيئي پون؛! بينهن نيا پي نه تئي، جن مسافر سپرين، سي مر رويو رون! بينهن نيا پي نه تئي

*O camel, cease thy lingering
And lengthen out thy pace.
This once my loved one bring me nigh.
Then in thine ears there cannot ring
The semblance of a yearning sigh.
For thee I bring the sandalwood.
Let others salt-bush eat.
This very night be thine the mood
To take me where my loved one stood
That there we twain may meet.*

The symbol of the ‘camel’ is usually associated with the baser self in mystical poetry and in these lines the ‘camel’ is being urged by its master to shed of its laziness and move on. It is charmed with promises of ‘sandal wood’. The camel is the medium which will take the master to the *loved one* (Allah). So without the camel, the master cannot reach the *loved one*. The camel is tempted and lured with promises of *wealth of buds*. Here, the camel does not symbolize the “baser self” but the incontinent body. His reluctance to tread a new undiscovered path is very natural. It is difficult to adapt to change. His master uses coercion to bring him to reason but to no avail.

*The way the herd is gone, he lies
and only gapes that side.*
He gazes at his herd agape when he is in captivity.
*With shackled feet still growl will he
But will not wander far from home.*

Humans and animals are gregarious. They live in groups and communities and it is very difficult for them to give up their habitat and environment. *Home* is a symbol of native beliefs and the security of a frequented path. The camel will not *wander far from home* means he cannot face the ordeals of an untreaded path. So, while the master of the camel (soul) is frustrated over the camel’s (body) refusal to comply with his wishes, he is quite helpless because the soul and body cannot achieve any nobility without unison. These lines unfold the natural progression towards a spiritual state; the inhibitions laid by society, the difficulty of breaking free of family bonds, denouncing the accepted customs and norms of living. These are daunting challenges. The spiritual awakening occurs in the soul and the body has to be tempered by soft pleas, temptations and force. But whatever happens is an internal process. It cannot be forcefully imposed.

*Thou seekest not the fragrant grass
But spurnest it as something ill.
It must be thy distorted mood
That made thee find the salt-bush good.*

The camel is being offered *fragrant grass* but he prefers the *salt-bush*. He is being offered:

*My camel, I will give thee reins
Of gold, and trappings fine;
But he prefers fetters.
If to the one Beloved mine
Thou wilt bring me this night*

There is such stubbornness in the camels' refusal that the master is reduced to pleas and he pray to Allah to shower mercy upon the camel and to bless him with a spiritual insight.

*O lord, into this camel's head
Put something that in sense doth share.
O save him, Lord of Mercy, save:
Such is Latif the poet's prayer.*

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai focuses on deep social issues. Perseverance and trials shake a person's resolve. In this case, we see how the soul has awakened but the body is unwilling to adapt to the new mode of life. The camel symbolizes the body because it is being tempted with physical pleasures and it is the one suffering physically (fetters and chains) and it is the one which will carry the soul to the loved one (Allah). Also, the body distinguishes one cult from another. The dress code and demeanor is displayed through the body.

"The mysticism which runs all through the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif is a love mysticism with a rich religious significance. It is not a philosophic mysticism" (Sorley, 1984). The chief mission of Shah has always been that of social reformation and the healing of the soul but he views the world from the perspective of a human who frequently errs. He does not expect man to undergo a miraculous transformation. He cajoles, pleads, empathises and bears the torch for his followers. Finally, when the camel (body) is in a state of transition and has forsaken much of its old habits, it is tempted to retreat from this new chosen path by worldly callings.

*But owners, keepers of the field,
With shouts his sweet indulgence spurn*

This is another social reality. Human ties are very difficult to break but not impossible if there is enough will power.

*With zest the camel browses now
On creepers such as made him yearn:*

After the final awakening the camel (body) with *zest* pursues the path to the loved one (Allah).

Findings and conclusion

Sufism is about finding God and the rustic Sufi poets show us how to do it in a simple and natural way. Sufi poetry is about simple people and their simple acts and how God can be found and mystical experiences felt in ordinary circumstances.

Sufism has vast philosophical and intellectual dimensions but this study focused on its human and social elements. How can a common man identify himself with this exquisite mystery? There is a ‘camel’ and a ‘thief’ within all of us. The Sufi poets empathise with us for our human failings, bear with us in our reluctance to change and rejoice when we finally surrender to Allah. The natural process of change is not condemned rather it is considered as an essential prerequisite to ultimate salvation.

The divine seeker is heartily welcomed:

کونا ایہنلا بسکڑ ےستی نچہوہٹ اہک ےاپسکڑ ےاچک رچا کن با سنو ناکھو ننہا بیاخ ہل یجگڑ یگاھتو نچوہڑ ایہو
ایہلیراتو نا ایکر نلت شکڑ ے

“*The seeker of light*” has come in an ‘attire’ like an eager student. He should be addressed candidly and made to feel at home. He has entered the sanctuary hence must not be discouraged. His separation from the divine truth is pre-natal. He was separated on the first night of birth. Wandering, he has come at last to the right place. He shouldn’t be called a servant or a shepherd. He is the seeker of light. The tone of the poet is soft and endearing towards the new comer.

Sufism is for the common multitude, not for a chosen a few. It moralizes, preaches and calls towards Allah but it does not ask us to step out of our social reality. God can be felt by a farmer, a minstrel or a king. The mystical experience can overcome a farmer while reaping or a weaver while weaving.

The goal of true research should be to uncover and simplify reality especially if the phenomenon is too complex for normal human understanding. Sufism has been lauded, appreciated and enjoyed by people over the centuries but not adequately understood. It has become a branch of knowledge reserved for the scholarly while a common man is left stumbling at its threshold. Human beings are frequently drawn towards ideas and beliefs that appear promising to them; that give them meaning and direction. Sufism should be simplified for a common man to benefit. It is true that some aspects of Sufism are too intellectual and philosophical to be put in simple words but any knowledge that aims to bring man close to God cannot be unapproachable. Future studies on Sufism should be directed towards making it more visible and transmittable. Sufism should be exploited, deconstructed and fragmented to create a meaningful whole rather than stifling it with layers of ambiguity.

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